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# “HAMLET AND THE MYSTERY OF AMY ROBSART”: A REPLY

BY HORACE HOWARD FURNESS, JR.

IT would almost seem as though Professor Thompson had written his elaborate exposition of the parallelism between the Mystery of Amy Robsart and *Hamlet* (in the May number of THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW) in ridicule of those complicated ciphers which others have declared exist in some of Shakespeare's plays. The whole scheme and unraveling of the tangle is so superficially ingenious that one hesitates to treat it seriously, lest he be greeted by the derisive laughter of the author at the success of this literary hoax. Even at the risk of this ridicule it may be well to show just wherein Professor Thompson's conclusions are not warranted. In the first place: The hypothesis that Shakespeare composed *Hamlet* in order to expose a court scandal, and inveigh against the glaring sins of the times, is not supported by any evidence whatever; at least Professor Thompson produces none. We should be furnished with facts as to Shakespeare's source of his knowledge. We should be shown that Shakespeare was smarting under rebuffs from those high in office, and thus divulged state secrets out of spite. We should be shown that Shakespeare's particular animus was against Leicester, and should be told the incidents which aroused it. Without this information there is no reason why Shakespeare should rake up concealed facts in a case which had been discussed and sifted almost before he was born—Amy Robsart died in 1560—and throw out veiled hints accusing the principal agents, one of whom, Leicester, had died ten or twelve years before Shakespeare wrote his play. What person then witnessing the play would cast his memory back thirty years or more and at once apply some obscure reference to a case which had long since ceased to excite any interest? Furthermore, even had Shakespeare openly avowed his belief in Leicester's guilt, who

would have paid any attention, or attached any importance, to the words of a young playwright, who at that date, 1598, was only beginning his career?

But let us examine Mr. Thompson's statement of his facts in the order wherein he presents them.

Mention is made of but two Quartos, 1603 and 1604, as appearing before the Folio of 1623, whereas there were three others, one in 1605, one in 1611, and one undated, a clear witness to the great popularity of the play, although Mr. Thompson several times refers to it as but "caviare to the general". The Quarto of 1604 is evidently a rewritten version of the play as it appeared in 1603; there are many additions and some omissions. But when Mr. Thompson declares that "it is an inescapable conclusion that in the revised version Shakespeare introduced a large element of the personal equation", it is taking for granted that we know just what that personal equation might be. Did Shakespeare ever show himself completely? Such phrases as "beyond doubt", "it is quite certain", are somewhat dangerous when applied to a theory touching Shakespeare's creations, and are apt to excite antagonism, in place of acquiescence. Until we have more positive evidence of Shakespeare's own character I, for one, shall not accept this dogmatic assertion that *Hamlet is Shakespeare*.

Again: "In a play purporting to be based on actual history it was natural, even inevitable, that Shakespeare should have woven in contemporary allusions or incidents which, however much metamorphosed in the drama, nevertheless were recognized as familiar by the audience." This is, of course, true to a certain extent. The chance mention of some actual incident, whereof the date is known, is one of the few ways we still have of establishing the date of composition of any play. But it is the despair of the historian that of these historic allusions Shakespeare has far fewer than any of his contemporaries. He seems to have been so immersed in his own story and drama that the everyday events passed him by almost unregarded. Still less is it likely that he should have traveled back thirty years and more to cast out obscure allusions to an incident which few among his audience would be likely to recall; or if they did vaguely, would they have instantly applied it to the case of Amy

Robsalt and Leicester? What if they had? What satisfaction could Shakespeare have found in thus covertly accusing one dead these ten years? Of one thing we may be sure: had these pointed remarks and veiled allusions been thought to apply either to the Queen or Leicester, even remotely, the players would have been severely reprimanded; as they were in 1589 on the direction of Burleigh, who accused them of introducing matters of state upon the stage. Burleigh himself died in 1598, but his son and successor would doubtless have been quite as vigilant.

Mr. Thompson lays great stress upon the parallelism between the concealment of Polonius behind the arras and an incident mentioned by Camden wherein Sir Robert Cecil, during the trial of Essex in 1601, overheard an accusation of himself by Essex and hastily appeared to answer and refute the charge. "It is not recorded," adds Mr. Thompson, "but it might easily have occurred, that when Cecil made his abrupt appearance as it were from 'behind the arras', Essex's sarcastic comment was 'I thought I smelled a rat'." Why stop our supposititious case here? By all means let us imagine Shakespeare slyly ensconced behind another portion of the arras and, anticipating Burns, remarking to himself: "A chiel's amang you taking notes, And faith, he 'll prent it!" As a matter of fact the concealment of Polonius was not original with Shakespeare. It occurs as an incident in the earliest version of the Hamlet story that has come down to us,—that of Saxo Grammaticus—where the King's spy conceals himself under the rushes on the floor and is slain by Amlethus. The hiding of a spy behind the arras was a favorite device on the Elizabethan stage. Shakespeare had already used this device in two earlier plays. In the *First Part of Henry IV* (II, IV, 549) the Prince bids Falstaff: "Go, hide thee behind the arras," where later he is found "snorting like a horse". Again, in *Much Ado About Nothing* (I, III, 63) Borachio says: "I whipt me behind the arras; and there heard it agreed upon that the Prince should woo Hero for himself." There can be little doubt that such was the practice even in everyday affairs.

Mr. Thompson says: "*Hamlet* is Shakespeare's protest against the condition of Elizabethan England. It was not Denmark but England that was rotten. Not merely Hamlet, but Shakespeare

felt that 'the time is out of joint'." Again we are moved to ask, Why should Shakespeare have had the smallest interest in such matters? He was a player, playwright, and poet; politics or the affairs at court were out of his sphere. He was no meddler with such dangerous topics as court scandal. It must be remembered also that the Earl of Leicester's company of actors was the company with which Shakespeare was first allied. This alone would have withheld him from calling attention to any unknown facts about his patron, when the Amy Robsart scandal was almost forgotten. If there was one sin Shakespeare despised above all others, it was ingratitude.

"As long as Elizabeth lived it was, of course, impossible publicly to criticize her, were it never so guardedly done. It is significant that the appearance of *Hamlet* upon the stage coincides with the death of Elizabeth." Had Mr. Thompson said the appearance of *Hamlet* in print, he would have been within the truth. As a matter of fact, *Hamlet* was probably composed between 1598 and 1600, and acted first either in 1600 or 1601; and Elizabeth was not so decrepit then as to suffer any upstart player to traduce her or her former favorite. This seems fatal to the success of Mr. Thompson's elaborate conclusion, that the play of *Hamlet* is merely an intricate exposition of facts in regard to the death of Amy Robsart. By his own showing those facts are still clouded in mystery; that Shakespeare should have had access to original sources for his information is simply unbelievable.

Having presented the outline of his case Professor Thompson then proceeds to give quotations from *Hamlet*, "which seem to have a positive index, and probably do darkly refer to the case of Amy Robsart, to Leicester and Elizabeth". This is, at best, a rather fallacious means of proving a point, since isolated lines without their context may be applied to almost any incident we may choose. Any collection of quotations for occasions will show how easily this may be done. This then is how Professor Thompson does it: "Most seeming virtuous Queen." "Assume a virtue if you have it not." "One can imagine," he comments, "men in the audience who heard these words look at one another with question in their eyes . . . or shrug their shoulders with shrewd amusement." No; I, for one, cannot by the widest

stretch of imagination, picture members of Shakespeare's audience doing any such thing. They heard the context, and when the Ghost says that Claudius "won to his shameful lust the will of my most seeming virtuous Queen", they had no reason whatever to think that Shakespeare, by such words, referred to Queen Elizabeth and Leicester, since the rest of the sentence was quite inappropriate.

Why they should have smiled significantly at the line, "Assume a virtue," etc., I am at a loss to understand; or to what dark mystery this was supposed to refer.

On the line "Though this be madness, yet there's method in 't," Professor Thompson comments: "Who were there among the wise in worldliness and the intricacies and chicanery of the politics and diplomacy of that day who did not find a fang in this remark? None but men steeped in the great secrets of the reign of Elizabeth could have fully perceived the significance of Hamlet's words, or the marvelously subtle method Shakespeare employed to convey his message, and with them silence was discretion."

Why should any one think a hidden meaning intended here? Consider the situation: Polonius has set himself to force Hamlet into a betrayal of his state of mind, and is met by replies pregnant with meaning and wisdom. What could his comment have been otherwise than this very line? (And by the way, the words are not given to Hamlet as Mr. Thompson says they are.) Had the line occurred in an epilogue to the whole play, as a warning to the audience to look below the surface, there might be some slight possibility that it referred to a political satire; but as it here occurs, in the middle of a dialogue, with direct reference to what has gone before, there is not a chance but that it means exactly what we all must understand.

Again, if this sinister meaning could be perceived only by those who were thoroughly acquainted with "the policies and diplomacy of the day", of what avail was Shakespeare's elaborate method of telling them what they already knew?

But how did he become the repository of these tremendous state secrets?

It is sincerely to be deplored that Professor Thompson is not more accurate in his quotations of lines, or references to situations

in the play. Such carelessness is apt to beget a lack of confidence in his deductions. It has just been shown that the line "Though this be madness", etc., is wrongly assigned to Hamlet, and here again we find in the next paragraph: "The dullards were given a broad hint in the seemingly casual mention that a play might be 'an abstract and brief chronicle' of the time, an idea repeated in Hamlet's exclamation, 'The play's the thing Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.' King or Queen mattered little to Shakespeare. The principle and the point were identical in either case. Hamlet explains to the court assembled to hear the play: 'You shall see anon how the murderer gets the love of Gonzago's wife.'"

In the first place, it is not a *play*, but the players, who are spoken of by Hamlet as "the abstract and brief chronicles of the time"; and secondly, Hamlet's exclamation has no relation whatever to his former remark in regard to the players. Thirdly: Hamlet does not explain the play to the court at any time; he interprets certain lines to Ophelia, and comments on others to the King and Queen. The line which Mr. Thompson quotes is the climax of the whole scene, and is hurled almost in the King's face as he rises in terror. How or in what way this particular line could be twisted into a reference to the murder of Amy Robsart, Professor Thompson does not explain beyond coupling it with the four line stanza, uttered by Hamlet:

For thou dost know, O Damon dear,  
This realm dismantled was  
Of Jove himself, and now reigns here,  
A very, very—pajock.

And here the Professor's hobby has led him into a quagmire indeed. As is seen, Hamlet omits the word rhyming with "was". To this Horatio remarks, "You might have rhymed"—that is, the word which fits it, by implication, is *ass*. Mr. Thompson asks: "What word most naturally occurs to the mind which will rhyme with 'was'?" And then proceeds to answer his question with the extraordinary suggestion that the missing word is "coz", the familiar abbreviation of the word "cousin" and here used to indicate Leicester, who may have been so addressed by Elizabeth. The two words in present day usage have a certain resemblance in

sound sufficient for rhyming purposes, but in Shakespeare's day *was* invariably rhymed with such words as *glass*, *pass*, etc. For example, in a preceding scene Hamlet says: "Why, 'As by lot, God wot,' and then, you know, 'It came to pass, as most like it was'" (II, II, 434). Again, in *Lucrece*:

Without the bed her other fair hand was,  
On the green coverlet; whose perfect white  
Show'd like an April daisy on the grass.

As regards the word "coz", as it was a contraction of the word "cousin" it retained the pronunciation of the first syllable of that word, which in Shakespeare's time was like that of the French word *Coozin*. By no possibility, therefore, would the words *cooz* and *wass* rhyme. Is it worth while to discuss the applicability of the stanza to Leicester after showing how the word suggested is quite inadmissible on the score of rhyme?

These are fair samples of Professor Thompson's use of certain lines in the play and his deductions. The two or three others seem to me quite as wide of any hidden meaning.

Many readers will doubtless read with interest Professor Thompson's entertaining article. That he will likewise gain a corresponding number of adherents to his view of the matter is quite another question.

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